



February 21, 2017

The Honorable Marco Rubio
United States Senate
284 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

MELISSA MCKINLAY

**County Commissioner
District 6**

Palm Beach County
Board of County Commissioners



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Dear Senator Rubio:

As the Palm Beach County Commissioner elected to serve the economically distressed cities of Belle Glade, Pahokee, and South Bay, I am extremely concerned about their urgent housing crisis. I am writing to request your assistance, and I urge you to join me in a tour of the area so you can see firsthand the magnitude of the challenges we must confront.

The Glades region is rural, located more than 38 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. It is Florida's leader in agriculture, producing some of the highest-yielding sugar cane, corn, rice, bell pepper, lettuce, and radish crops in the nation, while generating approximately \$1 billion in sales yearly. Despite this, a high percentage of the area's residents struggle due to low wages and under-employment. Some statistics will help reveal the housing struggles the residents face:

- The poverty level in the Glades region is approximately 40%.
- A full 8% of occupied housing units there lack a complete kitchen, 6.4% lack complete plumbing, and 3.6% lack complete heating/air conditioning.
- Renters occupy 54% of housing in the region, whereas in the rest of the county it is 28%.
- The average age of residential structures is 42 years, compared to 32 years for the rest of the county.

In August 2015, 200 residents were nearly forced to leave Grand Lake Apartments, a 384-unit complex in Belle Glade, due to dangerous living conditions. This happened only days before the beginning of the school year. In December 2016, just a few days before Christmas, 40 families in Belle Glade had to leave two condemned apartment buildings in which some units had no running water or electricity. In both of these events, the buildings had numerous structural, fire safety, and mold concerns. Many of the older structures in the region have had their maintenance neglected in addition to not being code compliant with hurricane mitigation standards. Unfortunately, there are more buildings throughout the region in an unacceptable state for the

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residents living in them, and these residents have few options to relocate elsewhere.

This unsettling knowledge points to another problem: the lack of project-based housing vouchers or other subsidies that would enable residents to move into safe, affordable housing. In the Glades region, for example, there are currently at least 264 people on the waiting list for housing vouchers. Increasing the number of available project-based vouchers would also raise the likelihood that landlords would maintain or make vital upgrades to their properties, or even build newer units.

Furthermore, I am concerned with the age of the USDA Rural Housing complexes in Belle Glade—comprised of the Okeechobee and Osceola Centers—which encompass 714 units across 455 buildings. Nearly half of all total buildings were built in 1968. Seventy-five percent were built in 1982 or earlier, with the last new buildings, a total of 14, built in 1997. We must be vigilant that these buildings are meeting the needs of the vulnerable residents who reside in them.

I would like to extend an invitation, with your assistance, to the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture to tour the region as well. Working together, I am confident that we will be able to make a positive difference in the availability and safety of affordable housing for the residents of this region, particularly those who help grow our nation's food.

Please let me know if your schedule permits you to visit the area. I can be reached at 561-355-2206 or mmckinlay@pbcgov.org and am happy to coordinate any details for a visit. Thank you for your time and help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Melissa McKinlay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Melissa" on the top line and "McKinlay" on the bottom line.

Melissa McKinlay, Vice-Mayor
Palm Beach County Commission
District 6

cc: Alberto Martinez, Senior Advisor to Sen. Rubio
Greg Langowski, Regional Director, Sen. Rubio